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Joshua 10:40-41, New Living Translation.

So Joshua conquered the whole region—the kings and people of the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills, and the mountain slopes. He completely destroyed everyone in the land, leaving no survivors, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. ⁴¹ Joshua slaughtered them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza and from the region around the town of Goshen up to Gibeon.

Canaan and the Bending of Spacetime.

I once talked to a psychiatric patient who had a deep knowledge of Newtonian Physics as well as Modern Physics, including relativity. She also said that she was well educated in Quantum Physics, but we didn't go there. Einstein was as far as I could go. She was not psychotic. She did not have schizophrenia or a schizoaffective disorder. I'm not fully aware of what these diseases even are, and as a chaplain, I'm just a calm, affirming person. This woman simply suffered from depression, and she was a highly educated person – and a Christian. And you know what I am going to say now: I will get back to her. We'll call her Annie.

When non-believers criticize the Bible, without a doubt the most common evidence of how cruel and false our God must be is said to be embodied in the invasion of Canaan. Moses dies just before entering Canaan. The Israelites have

been wandering in the desert for 40 years. Before he dies, Moses overviews for the generation born in the desert the history of their people, the obligation that they have as holders of a covenant with God to live in a moral, ethical fashion, and the need to never abandon their God. Moses tells his people that they must be strong and courageous. God commands Moses to name Joshua as his successor. In the books of Joshua and Judges, we are told of the invasion of Canaan, the slaughter of the Canaanites, and the division of the land among the twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve tribes represent the twelve sons of Jacob, the patriarch of the Chosen People. Joshua was a member of one of those tribes, Ephraim. The stories that we get in Joshua and Judges conflict in some ways.

We do not know who wrote the Book of Joshua. There are two sets of dates to consider: when the events took place and when the book was written. The story takes place in the late 13th century B.C. But it is believed that the book was written during the Babylonian exile, around 587 to 538 B.C. – six or seven hundred years after the events took place. This is very important. There is no question that parts of the story presented in Joshua and Judges are likely to be idealized, based on a portrayal that appealed to people living during the exile. A common theory that was very widely held among scholars for a long time is the following: the Israelites had been separated from their land by a colonial empire,

the Babylonians. After they returned, or perhaps when they were trusting God to one day return them to their land, they wanted a forceful, dramatic document that would assure their descendants that the Holy Land was their land.

Remember that a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures is that when the People of God start to worship the pagan idols of their neighbors, God sends in a foreign army to brutally punish them. That was why God let the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple, the First Temple. God had long promised his people a land of their own, telling them that they would take it from a pagan, sinful people. In Deuteronomy Chapter 9 God says this to his people:

⁵Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Thus, the long-held scholarly theory was that the story we are given in the Books of Joshua and Judges that describe the invasion of Canaan was pitched in a way to reinforce in the minds of the returnees from Babylon that they were God's people, and that they had served God by being that invading army that punished an evil people. The land of Israel was theirs provided they were holy and followed God's laws, unlike the multitude of pagans around them. The theory is that in truth, there was no massive invasion of Canaan. This is backed up by the fact that the accounts in the Books of Joshua and Judges conflict, with Judges making it

seem that the war with the Canaanites didn't obliterate the enemy at all. Here is a passage from Joshua, Chapter 10:

So Joshua conquered the whole region—the kings and people of the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills, and the mountain slopes. He completely destroyed everyone in the land, leaving no survivors, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. ⁴¹ Joshua slaughtered them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza and from the region around the town of Goshen up to Gibeon.

But here is a quote from Judges, Chapter 1:

²⁷ The tribe of Manasseh failed to drive out the people living in Beth-shan, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo, and all their surrounding settlements, because the Canaanites were determined to stay in that region.

There is more evidence. There is a significant lack of archeological evidence of the forty years of wandering in the desert, which would have involved up to 2.5 million people, as 600,000 adult males were said to have been in the desert.

Further, there is strong evidence that the Canaanites survived and that their descendants are alive and well today, largely in Lebanon, just north of today's Israel. Scientists have carefully analyzed the DNA of people from Christian, Druze, and Muslim sects in Lebanon. They have compared this DNA to DNA found in gravesites dating to 1700 B.C., that is 3,700 years ago, in the Biblical city of Sidon, where ancient Canaanites lived. There was a 90% correlation, strongly suggesting that the people who live in Lebanon today are descendants of the Canaanites.

Further, there was believed to be zero archeological evidence that would suggest

that there was widespread destruction of Canaanite cities between the Bronze and Iron Ages, when the invasion would have happened.

So, most scholars seemed to agree that there was no massive exodus, that at most, a handful of Hebrew people escaped Egypt and brought the notion of a monotheistic religion to Canaan, and that the Israelite culture emerged from the Canaanite population, which was diverse before any Hebrew influence. The Canaanites were a loosely connected group of various ethnic peoples who were never unified as a single people. They were seafaring folks who built settlements around the Mediterranean Sea. They were also Phoenician peoples who had an alphabet long before surrounding cultures had any such thing. We could easily imagine conflict arising among them. There might have been modest wars, ones that left no archeological evidence, because contrary to what we read in the Bible, whole cities like the fortified community of Jerico were not wiped out. In the end, perhaps the people who believed in a single God established a new nation and religion. Only later was history retrofitted with the tale of a brave Israelite army conquering the land of the evil, pagan Canaanites – proof that God will never let his people down, that they will always find a way to return to Israel.

I'd like talk about Annie. I had vaguely remembered studying the General Theory of Relativity in grad school. This is what Annie reminded me of. One of

the massive consequences of Einstein's discovery is that the Newtonian notion of gravity that most of us older people were taught in school is wrong. Gravity is not a force. In truth, any object with mass can warp spacetime, and the bigger the object, the more spacetime is warped. This causes objects to follow curved paths. It looks to us that objects in motion are being pulled by a force, like the moon being pulled in by the Earth or the Earth being pulled in by the sun, thus causing the body with less mass to fall toward the object with the larger mass, and then curve around it when the smaller object gets near the bigger object. The truth is that the Earth continues to move in a straight line, but the mass of the sun curves space, making it appear that the Earth is moving along a curve. And the moon continues to move in a straight line, but it is doing so along space that has been curved by the mass of the Earth. Objects with mass also bend time, and that is why relativity tells us that as we get near huge masses, time runs slower. I'll have another comment to make about Annie, who told me that she began to study physics in college and then graduate school because she was deeply depressed and it gave her something bigger than herself to worry about.

Getting back to the story of the invasion of Canaan, more recent scientific research has caused the pendulum to swing back the other way, with scholars now finding reasons to believe the biblical version of the conquering of the land

of the Chosen People. First, there is extensive material in the Hebrew Scriptures backing up the story of the invasion of Canaan, and this history is key to the entire Old Testament message. The oldest of the prophets is Abram or Abraham. In Genesis Chapter 12, God makes a promise to him: If Abram answers God's call to go to Canaan, which is an area today that includes parts of modern Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and if Abram's people continue to obey the laws of God – which were eventually written on stone tablets brought down a mountain several hundred years later by Moses – God would grant his people three things. First, God would bless his people. Second, God would ensure that these people, whom we know as the Israelites, the predecessors of the Jews, would have many progeny or descendants. Third, God would give the Israelites the land of Canaan as their land. This promise of land – the Promised Land, as we know it – is repeated in Genesis to Jacob, Abraham's grandson. Only much later, would the followers of the recently deceased Moses, under the command of Joshua, claim this land. The invasion of Canaan is directly or indirectly referenced in Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, 1 Samuel, as well as Joshua and Judges.

There is also strong evidence outside the Bible. Recent archeological evidence suggests that indeed, multiple Canaanite cities were utterly destroyed in the 13th century B.C. It had been believed the Jerico was destroyed, perhaps by a

fire and an earthquake or by an Egyptian invasion, around 1550 B.C., but newer evidence says that this happened later, perhaps right when the Bible says it happened. Archeologists have found thick ash layers, broken pottery, damaged fortifications, and other evidence of an invasion at this time. Some diplomatic correspondence has been found that suggests unrest in the region in the general period of the supposed Canaan invasion. This would lend credence to the biblical version, with the result that I have condensed from Joshua, Chapter 23:

***23** A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, ²Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, "I am now old. ³You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations. ⁵The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you. ⁶Therefore, turn aside from the Law neither to the right hand nor to the left; do not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods. ¹¹Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God. ¹²For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, ¹³know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive them before you, but they shall be a snare for you, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you.*

This is the bottom line is this. We don't know what the true historical story of the invasion of Canaan is. It does seem wrong to us today that God would put his stamp of approval on the destruction of cities and the killing of innocent people. But in the Bible God does at times approve of the killing even of his own people. The Bible is an ancient document written by humans who lived during

violent, pre-scientific times, and who were doing their best to describe a God who insists on us acknowledging his existence and following his laws of morality. Studying it historically will never lead to a definitive interpretation, and it will never replace what we can get out of the Bible spiritually.

Back to Annie. I am reasonably confident in what I have told you about how relativity has altered our notion of gravity. But Annie also told me, and I verified it later, that even Einstein's work is incomplete when it comes to mathematically modeling the way bodies in space impact each other. Specifically, it is incomplete compared to more newly acquired knowledge, like Quantum Mechanics. It does not explain how gravity works at a microscopic level, because it doesn't have a notion of gravitons, or particle-based interactions. There is apparently more, but at this point in our discussion, I tried to redirect Annie to talk to me about her spiritual beliefs. She said that her study of physics had strengthened her faith and made her feel a lot better about the many things in the Bible that seem to conflict, to not jibe with established scientific and historical information, or that simply appear to be wrong. She said that her study of science has led her to believe that just like our knowledge of God, the science we ultimately will know will only be incrementally revealed – and we will never fully understand everything. We are meant to live with a significant level of mystery.

That is how we build trust in God: we are forced to admit that in the end, we are not the owners of truth, and we are not the harbingers of whatever will unfold in eternity. God knows all, and God has given us the minds to slowly understand greater scientific and spiritual truths. That's the exciting part of the story. There is always more to discover. We will grow as intellectuals and as beings made in the image of God, and the growth will not stop until God decides that we are ready for the next great phase of existence.

When I was an undergraduate, I studied at Occidental College in a collaborative program with Caltech. The motto of Caltech, as I recall, is "The truth shall make you free," which of course comes from John 8:31-32. Many translations say: "*set you free*" and not "*make you free*":

³¹So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

This meant nothing to me when I was 18 to 22 years old. Now, in part thanks to the brilliant and gracious Annie, I see that this describes an incredible gift that God has given us in this temporary life. We can always learn more about the universe around us and that exists beyond our ability to imagine, and we can always learn more about our life with God, which also exists beyond our ability to imagine. And as we learn, we will be incrementally set more and more free.